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THE DEATH OF THE FAITHFUL.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT HAGLEY,

ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 30, MDCCCLVII.

BEING THE NEXT AFTER THE

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A S E R M O N .

HEBREWS xi. 13.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

THE Apostle is speaking of the Elders, Abel, Enoch, Noah,—of Abraham and his descendants. Though, in regard to some of these, that which they had not received, but saw beforehand, and were persuaded of, was the possession of a temporal inheritance; yet we may understand St. Paul to refer generally to the promises of mediation and redemption, and whatsoever tends to the recovery of the life which Adam had forfeited for himself and his posterity. For he proceeds to tell us, that so convinced were the old Fathers of the spiritual nature of these promises, that, as to this world, they felt them-

selves to be but strangers in it; and walked through it as pilgrims, seeking a better country. They died in faith of One that was to come. Their thoughts and aspirations turned that way. Jacob and his descendants desired to be buried in that land, where they believed they should be partakers of the earliest glories of the Messiah, in whose faith and distant expectation they had lived and died. When he laid Rachel in her grave at Ephrath, we cannot doubt he dwelt in faith on purposes yet to be accomplished—glory yet to be revealed, he knew not how—some hidden mystery of a great salvation; even as Abraham was ready to give up Isaac, in whose line the promises centred, accounting that God would raise him up, even from the dead! and this when there was nothing to establish him in the truth of that doctrine, but the original promise to the woman, interpreted, it may be, by the translation of Enoch, and the death of the mild and gentle Abel, irreconcilable with Divine justice on any other supposition than that life was yet in store for the righteous dead.

This so great faith of the old Patriarchs is recorded for our admonition, upon whom the

ends of the world are come, that we may not fall below the measure of those who went before us ; yea, rather, having our hearts enlarged by the grace of Christ, we should exceed their measure ; believe more readily, more fully, on account of that better thing which God has provided for us, viz., that clearer revelation, that more abundant confirmation, that nearer expectation, unto which the faithful in Christ Jesus have attained.

And, God be thanked, so it is. We are compassed about with a vast cloud of witnesses. From crosses on which they were impaled; from fires in which they were consumed, from dens and caves of the earth, where they hid themselves from the fury of their persecutors, have Christians witnessed continually the truth of God in Jesus Christ. Yea, and by that same confession of the insufficiency of earthly things to satisfy the cravings of the spirit, those whom we ourselves have known in the flesh, have glorified the name of their Redeemer. They died in faith; were perfected even in dying; and, while they uttered with their lips their last and final conviction of the truth of

God's promises, and the justice of His dealings, and the vastness of His love, were made partakers in their innermost spirit of that joy and peace which passeth understanding, which they had sought, it may be, all the days of their pilgrimage, in great weakness and often much instability of purpose; but, as the end drew near, felt themselves possessed of, and were even as that merchantman seeking goodly pearls, who, having found the one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it. Nor would they part with it again, as far as they themselves are concerned, for all that could be offered them. Nor should we, when once persuaded of this blessedness of theirs, have any other thought concerning them than those which the words of the text suggest to us—that they were strangers here, and are now gone home,—pilgrims here, and wayfarers, who are now at rest after the dangers of the way. However strongly our affections may yearn after their wonted object, it would be against our higher conviction of truth to desire that they should be brought back from their everlasting home to a strange country; from their rest and peace to

labour and travail night and day, as pilgrims must. “They died in faith ;” that is enough for us. They were, a very short while ago, struggling with all those temptations with which we who are alive and remain have yet to struggle. We could not count them to have attained, or to be already perfect. We hoped they were pressing toward the mark, but our hope partook of the uncertainty which belongs to all things in this world, which things are liable to be shaken. But now, since they held fast by that sure anchor in dying ; since they confessed in death itself their faith in Him who said, “ Oh Death, I will be thy plagues,—Oh grave, I will be thy destruction :” since they manifested as entire a submission as it is possible for creatures compassed with infirmity to manifest to the will of an acknowledged all-just, all-merciful, and all-holy God, and this through the merits of their Redeemer ; since they thus lived and thus died, now we count them to have apprehended that for which also they were apprehended of Christ Jesus—to have laid hold on eternal life !

What has life—that which we commonly

call life—life in this world—what has life to offer in exchange for a decease thus accomplished? Hath it anything? Could love, however true,—could anything or everything we could offer, devotion, faithful attachment, care to please, regret that we ever displeased in ever so slight a thing, the repetition of every affectionate service, even for years (if years were permitted us),—could all this, and it is the best we have to offer,—compensate to them that sleep in Jesus, for the blessings they have now inherited in Him? We know in our heart of hearts it could not. They are happier far than we could make them. “They died in faith.” “We are come” — St. Paul addressed these same Hebrew Christians as being come—“unto Mount Sion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to a vast company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the Firstborn, which are written in Heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect; and to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling,” that speaketh such an excellent word to everyone that approacheth thereunto. We are come

to this holy company through faith, and hope, and love, which is in Christ Jesus. We are made partakers of this blessedness in degrees differing according to the grace that is given to us. But they have entered into peace. In God they dwell, and in Him rest. He is their portion, so that nothing can impair or disturb their possession of Him any more. They behold His presence in righteousness, and when they awake up after His likeness, they shall be satisfied therewith.

All these thoughts we are permitted, under the dispensation of grace, to entertain concerning them that are asleep, and not only permitted, but also encouraged to cherish; for without such thoughts many of us might be swallowed up of over-much sorrow. Our sorrow is permitted to us. Jesus wept at Lazarus's grave, and men saw him weep, and their testimony is recorded for our sakes. "Behold! how He loved him!" But with our sorrow Divine alleviations are given likewise; and these we are bound to use and to apply. For otherwise we should fail of the best alleviation of which such sorrow is capable, which is in the quiet

fulfilment of those duties which the bereavement itself brings with it, which duties are henceforth manifestly the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us. Having satisfied ourselves by careful circumspection of the need in which we stood of warning and chastisement (and which of us can say, I needed it not?); having pondered upon the manifold uses of such chastisement, and the revealed gracious purpose of God in sending it upon His servants, to the extent even of a positive assurance that it is a mark of His favour and love to them that seek Him (He saw a branch bearing fruit, and, lo! he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit); having commended ourselves in prayer, and by the intercession of our friends for us, to the help of His Holy Spirit—what remains for us to do, but, after the example of our most blessed Master and Saviour, to set about the work which God has appointed for us in the world, and in the faithful discharge of it, with purified affections, feeling that He is very near us and is dealing presently with us, to seek a closer conformity to His image, till we be verily transformed thereinto by the renewing of our mind,

and shall have proved all His good, and perfect, and acceptable will?—Nor is this the work of a few days, or weeks, or months (though ever so short a space may declare it within us: yea, there hath been such a thing on the earth as being made perfect in a short time to have fulfilled a long time), but so long as we live we must magnify God in this manner, and lift up our hands in His name, till at length He Himself shall finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness.

Nor, in order to fulfil these holy resolutions, need we bid farewell to our neighbour and our ordinary work, nor, as the great living Christian poet has expressed it,—

“ Strive to wind ourselves too high
For sinful man beneath the sky.”

No; when in this very place, some few days since, we blessed God's holy name for all His servants departed this life in His faith and fear, and besought Him to give us faith so to follow their good examples, that with them we might be partakers of His heavenly kingdom—the example of faith, and love, and patience of hope,

which was uppermost in the minds of us all, was one which had its especial sweetness in this, that it was furnished only in the midst of the ordinary duties of social and domestic life. God forbid that religion should be separated from these! Our blessed Lord Himself fulfilled His course in these! When He withdrew Himself and went apart to commune with God in prayer in desert places and mountain solitudes, it was only to return to His daily work among men refreshed [we are speaking of Him in His human nature]—refreshed and invigorated by that communion.

So let it be with our retirements. Let the sacred retirement of mourners—be it for a longer or shorter period, according to the exigence of their circumstances or the force of their grief, end in this, in an earnest effort to use this world as not abusing it, to live unto God and prepare ourselves for Heaven in the midst of it, regarding whatever of present ease, and comfort, and joy may be vouchsafed to us as given of His goodness, as by the same goodness and wisdom it may be taken away.

And remember, dear brethren, that if we are

faithful in these prayers and holy purposes, there is nothing to hinder us from attaining to the full measure of grace, which they who were in Christ before us have attained unto, only with their struggles and short-comings, and even, alas! their backslidings, with their sense of weakness, and imperfection, and deep unworthiness, with their cryings out, "How long, O Lord!"—our hearts at times wellnigh failing us for calling so long upon our God—He making as though He heard us not, and we, for the time, like unto them that go down into the pit:—and then, again, the brightness of His face shining upon us, His favour compassing us as a shield, His righteousness going before us, and His glory being our rereward.

I would now address myself, in conclusion, to all those who, if less immediately connected with this present sorrow, have been permitted, through the knowledge of it, to realize what it is to "die in faith." Let us all strive more earnestly than ever heretofore, to realize what it is to "live in faith." Let us regard this occasion, as I believe we are fully justified in regarding it on account of all its circumstances,

as an especial call to such a life—a call to which if we turn a dull and listless ear, God may never any more speak to us thus again,—a call, to which, for its appeal to the most tender associations, the holiest affections, the very innermost sympathies of a whole neighbourhood, we can scarce recall the like! What father, what mother, what son or daughter, what wife or husband, or sister or brother, stood by that grave unmoved? To which of us did it not speak of the value and importance, and yet the vanity and nothingness of our time here?—of its great value to ourselves and others, if one that dies in the Lord can so speak, as she is who is departed, now speaketh unto us,—of its vanity and nothingness, if God is pleased to cut us off in the midst of our purposes, yea, even of good and holy purposes, and duties done faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully, as unto the Lord Christ?—Oh! brethren, what an excellent discourse did that grave preach, and in what a willing frame were the hearers, and how could men choose but be edified! The very walls within which we were gathered together were a parable of wisdom and instruction to all those that

would receive it, broken down and ruinous as God hath been pleased to dissolve the fleshly tabernacle of her body ; yet being restored and built again—as God will surely rebuild and restore that which He hath broken down, in the day when He shall swallow up death in victory, and wipe away tears from off all faces ; when sorrow and mourning shall flee away, and the voice of lamentation shall be heard no more for ever !

Then shall that sight and scene be a savour of life unto us, or of death ? Shall we go from it, not unimpressed (that were wellnigh impossible), but through after carelessness unimproved ? Through want of prayer, want of watchfulness to observe God's dealings with ourselves and others, shall the grief that wrung our hearts at the time become as the sorrow of the world, which worketh death ; or hath it already wrought in us, and, dear brethren, shall we strive on, till it hath wrought effectually in us, repentance unto salvation ?

These are the questions which I feel that your pastor, in whose place I stand, would desire that I should put to your consciences. By these questions I do most honour to her dear memory,

and to the grief of those who mourn for her, if, through her departure, God be more honoured, and the name of His Christ magnified; and His Spirit called down from Heaven by more earnest and fervent prayer in your houses; yea, if, of those who worship here, even one who is entangled in covetousness and sin, should consider with himself of the end and issue of these things, and take heed betimes, while the day of salvation lasteth, seeing there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave.

THE END.



